

Author Interview - Ben Stoltzfus

1. *Transgression* follows a boy and his parents as they escape the Nazis during WWII and face danger as they make their way to America. Why was **this an important book** for you to write?

I was the last American boy to leave Bulgaria in 1942 after the Nazi occupation of the Balkans. It seemed important to document that fact as well as life for Americans at ACS, the American College in Sofia.

The novel is in four parts: Sofia, Istanbul, the Middle East, and America.

Writing *Transgression* was a catharsis. I wanted to show readers how to expunge *doxa*, i.e., ready-made values and beliefs transmitted by family, schools and the church; especially when *doxa* interferes with the maturation and wellbeing of a teenager.

Transgression is part of a trilogy: *The Eye of the Needle* (Viking, 19967) and *Valley of Roses* (Cypress-Trafford, 2003) are set in Bulgaria during WWII. They narrate similar themes. Like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, cinematic montage in *The Eye of the Needle* frames the world through the mind's eye of one person.

2. What **scene** in the book was the **most emotionally impactful** for you to write?

There were **four scenes**: **a.** Archangel taking the boy's soul on a wild ride down the Himalayas, floating it on the Ganges River into and over the Indian Ocean, down the Nile, west across the Mediterranean Sea, and south through the Sahara Desert past Ouagadougou to the jungle in Central Africa. I wanted to communicate the "emotional hurt" that Archangel and Satan were inflicting on the boy.

b. The narrator's and Mireille's love scene after reading Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*; especially the poem "To One Who Is Too Cheerful." There are two parts to the love scene: one scene describes what happened and the other one describes what the boy imagined would happen; both scenes were written with words. Was one more *real* than the other, and, if so, which one?

c. The evening after the baptismal scene when the boy walks along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, looks at the stars in the sky, locates Orion, the hunter, who also walked on water, listens to the lapping of the wavelets, and feels a oneness with creation.

d. The Eureka moment when the narrator realizes that he is not going to hell because his soul is all around him, going everywhere and nowhere.

3. What were some **themes** that were important for you to explore in this book?

My answers above explore and explain **four themes** that were important to me.

A fifth theme was structural foreshadowing: Describing the *wind* in the trees outside Sofia, the clicking of the palm fronds in Beirut, and the wind in the trees on the farm on Germany Hill, New York; these and others like them are all part of the boy's experience. Throughout the novel I wanted **events and images to echo each other**, from beginning to end.

Flowers are also an important **foreshadowing theme**, beginning with the narrator's botany collection and the language of flowers as metaphors of seduction by Mirka. Following that, Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* play an important role in the boy's relationship with Mireille; they echo Mirka's earlier seduction.

Fear is a theme: fear of internment by the Germans, fear of going to hell, fear of a submarine attack in the Mediterranean Sea by a German submarine, and fear that the battleship Tirpitz will attack the fifty-ship convoy crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The Bermuda Triangle functions as a hoax fear.

Books and writing are important themes. From part one of *Transgression* to the end, the novels, plays, and poetry of American, British, French, German, Greek, and Russian authors help the boy navigate through mazes of *doxa*. *The Bible* is frequently invoked.

Nightingales are another theme: the birds warble in the woods outside the boy's house in Bulgaria; they sing all night during his parents' honeymoon in Shiraz, Iran; they trill in the foothills of Mount Sannine north of Beirut; and the narrator writes a paper for his English teacher entitled *The Nightingales in Literature*. He even builds a birdhouse, hoping to attract a nightingale.

Oriental rugs and the symbolic colors in their patterns are yet another theme. They appear in Istanbul, in Aleppo, in Beirut, and in a friend's house by the Sea of Galilee. Many **foreshadowing** images and metaphors are woven into the woof and weft of the writing process. They are the figure in the carpet--the golden thread.

Music is a theme, starting with *Lily Marlene*, a nostalgic song for the girl left behind. It was popular with both German and Allied soldiers who sang it in German and in English; also, the very popular and ubiquitous "dream" songs such as *Dream, I Dream of You, Buy the Dream, and My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time*--Big Band songs that were heard in Europe, the Middle East, and America.

Capturing the sounds and colors of an outdoor food market in Istanbul was a challenge. I tried to use the connotations of words and the rhythms of language to capture the auditory and visual impact of vendors hawking their foods in high-pitched melodious voices.

Another challenge was describing the song of a nightingale--its joyful warbling and trilling in Sofia and Beirut that awaken the boy in the middle of the night.

All kinds of sounds **echo** each other. So do colors.

Stars, particularly Orion, play an important role. You see them in the night sky above the Sea of Galilee, above the pyramids at Giza, and in many other places.

Hitler and *war* are constant themes. *Transgression* begins with Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 and ends with the dropping of the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the fighting scenes in Europe and North Africa are objective correlatives for the boy's private battles with Archangel and Satan. Descriptions of the 1916 Turkish genocide of Armenians predates Hitler's death-camps where Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables" were killed.

Flaubert uses **foreshadowing** images that anticipate future ones in *Madame Bovary* and so does Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*.

4. What is the next book that you are working on and when will it be available?

I'm working on a book entitled *Baja: The Puma Drinks the New Moon*. It's a collaborative venture with Judith Palmer, my artist wife. Her pen-and-ink drawings and photo-etchings accompany my 70 haiku and illustrate our travels over the years, up and down the Baja peninsula. They embellish the topography, the flora, and the fauna of the region. The book will probably come out sometime in 2023.